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ABSTRACT

Businessmen who are concerned about their own communication effectiveness and the general communication practices of their organizations must first realize that attempts to improve communication take hard work and involve frequent failure. Although most businessmen believe communication to be ordinary and simple, they are concerned by the fact that they are frequently misunderstood by their associates. The misunderstandings cannot be resolved because communicators assume and expect understanding. When communication breaks down, they fix blame rather than seek solutions. The reasons employed for blaming communication failures on others are that the person who has misunderstood is either stupid, emotionally unbalanced, not motivated, or is of unsavory character. Effective interpersonal relationships can be improved with a sophisticated concept of human interaction. Books, consultants, and training courses in communication skills for businessmen that offer simplistic answers to the problem of human interaction should be rejected in favor of those that substitute the goal of understanding for gimmicks and formulas. (EE)

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there is no white horse: a first step toward improving communication in business

by David H. Smith

Although they are different in many respects, businessmen I talk with typically share a basic belief about communication with my undergraduates. Both seem to want me to tell them "The Secret" to successful human interaction. Both seem reluctant to believe that communication presents a series of problems which yield only reluctantly to solution

Several years ago one of my students wrote me a letter containing a story which I have found useful in thinking about this problem:

> A French Foreign Legion outpost in North Africa was surrounded by a band of hostile Arabs. Supplies were running low; the situation was critical. The commander summoned his men—
>
> "We have only one hope for survival—the Arabs' ammunition is stored behind their lines. If one of you men will volunteer to get through those lines, and blow up those munitions, we will be saved. It will not be easy. It means crawling, on hands and knees, over several miles of bleak desert sand. The brave man who volunteers for this duty may not survive, but indeed may be blown up in the act. But—if there is a man so brave—he will be richly rewarded. For his valor, I will personally see that he is presented with a white horse—to ride proudly, symbolizing his achievement—and a *big surprise*!"
>
> One small man stepped forward—"My commander, I am ready. I will do this deed. For the glory of France, and for the salvation of the regiment; and yes—for the white horse and the big surprise."
>
> "Splendid! We will outfit you immediately." And as darkness fell, the small, valiant man was lowered over the wall, and crept away into the night. Toward morning, the skies suddenly flashed the triumphant message that he was successful—the blast was deafening—the only question that remained: had the hero survived? As dawn broke, the victory was revealed as complete—the Arabs had vanished.
>
> Late that afternoon—crawling, clothes tattered, weak from the heat of the ordeal, the little man came slowly across the sands—and into the fortress.
>
> The commander greeted him with soldierly reserve; a crisp "Well done" and then—"I promised you two rewards for your valor—a white horse, and a big surprise. Are you ready to receive them?"
>
> Weakly, the man replied, "Yes, my commander. I am ready."
>
> "First then—the big surprise." The thrill of anticipation could be seen in the eyes of the valiant little hero.
>
> "Yes—the big surprise: . . . . . there is no white horse."

No matter how much we'd like to find it our search for "The Way" to have effective communication is bound to fail. The big surprise is that there is no white horse. Attempts to improve communication take hard work and involve frequent failure. Success can be increased only by developing a better understanding of the difficulty of communication.

Despite the frequency with which we communicate most people understand very little of what is involved when two human beings talk to each other. Indeed it may be the very pervasiveness of communication that keeps us from thinking about it. We simply don't give much thought to those things we do most often. Do we stop to consider when to inhale and exhale? Or how to put on trousers without falling down? How many of us could list in order the steps in the act of eating? It has been said that if we had to stop to consider just how to walk we would find ourselves immobile. And when it comes to talking we simply open our mouth and let the words come out. Only later do we wonder why they were misunderstood.

Since the assumptions we make about the world influence how we act in it, our assumptions about communication control in part how we behave toward other people. What are some of our usual assumptions about communication? First of all, we assume

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that when we say things others will understand and respond as we want them to. We expect the interpretation of our words by another to be about the same as the ideas we had in mind when we spoke the words. Second, we assume that the other person is attending primarily to what we say, that it is our words that lead to his response. Third, we assume that the factors involved in communication are rather simple, and rather easily under the control of the communicators, that if we or the others want to behave differently it will not be difficult to change. Unfortunately, none of these assumptions is well grounded in fact. All are based on a failure to understand the interplay of forces at work when we communicate.

Although we believe communication to be for the most part ordinary and simple, we are also concerned by the fact that we are frequently misunderstood. No matter how clear we think we have been we frequently just don't get through. As a communication specialist I'm often asked by people to listen to accounts of misunderstanding and to prescribe miracle advice which will innoculate against future cases of this common malady. Invariably, I find a particular pattern is fundamental to the disagreement. It is a pattern which has its roots in the assumptions listed above.

In response to some stimulus from within himself or from outside, person "A" initiates a communication attempt directed toward person "B." "A" expects "B" to respond in a particular manner, but finds instead that "B" does something quite unexpected. "B" may carry out a procedure which from "A's" point of view is wrong, "B" may say some "incorrect" thing, or "B" may say or do nothing at all. "B" will sometimes have as if he has been offended by "A's" remarks. Whichever of these responses "B" makes, it comes as a surprise to "A" who expected to be understood. After all "A" regards communication as simple and direct. If his assumption is correct, "B" should understand. But "B" does not. "B's" response is, to "A", bizarre, unreasonable. How, thinks "A", can anyone behave that way in response to such a simple clear message? The direct evidence of his failure to get from "B" the response he desires is frustrating to "A". What is he to do?

When a man has difficulty with a complex intricate task, he is likely to accept the problem and work to correct it, but when something simple goes wrong, he begins to look not to the difficulty of the task but to the people involved in the doing of the task to identify the cause of failure and frustration. We have all learned to fix guilt. When problems arise, it often seems more important to decide who to blame than to solve the problem. We all know people who cannot begin to untangle a difficulty unless they have first assured themselves and those around them that they didn't cause the problem. Indeed, if we were honest, we would recognize that each of us behaves in this way more or less frequently. Our culture has taught us to look not to the fates but to other people to find the reasons for our problems.

Returning to "A's" communication problem, what is he likely to do? He will examine his own role in the situation and find that what he said was clear. He, "A", understood himself quite well. The fault then must lie with "B". Why would "B" confuse such an easy message as the one "A" sent to him? Again we have learned and practiced a way of explaining. There are four typical reasons we give for the other person's failure. First, we may attribute it to his general lack of intelligence. We decide that he is simply not very bright. We say to a colleague, "You know I have been wondering about "B". He goofs up some of the simplest directives. I can write him a memo or talk to him personally, but he just doesn't seem to get the idea straight. I am not sure he's smart enough to handle his job. Maybe we should get somebody with a little more intelligence in that spot." A second explanation we sometimes use is that the other guy simply isn't devoted enough to his duty. He doesn't care. "Sometimes I wonder whether "B" really gives a damn about this company. No matter what I say to him, he seems to get the wrong idea. You would think if he really were concerned with doing a job and making this outfit move, he wouldn't screw things up like he does. He needs to decide just what's going to be important to him." Sometimes we get the same basic response at home, complete with tears. "You don't love me anymore." Whatever its form we often find the explanation that the other person doesn't care satisfying when we feel misunderstood. A third reason we sometimes give for communication failure is that the other person has a character defect. "You know that "B" is a real S.O.B. He deliberately tries to foul us up. We can send him a simple message, and he will twist it any way he can to his own advantage. He makes himself look good at our expense. You

really have to watch what you say to him." We are sure that things do not work because the other guy is bad. If he is not bad, we can use a fourth explanation—he's mad. We are all pretty good at being amateur psychiatrists. "I've been worried about "B". The strain around here may be getting to be too much for him. Watch him closely; he does funny things. I have explained a couple of procedures to him lately and he got them all confused. Do you think the company has the responsibility to do something for him?"

We may use any one of these four reasons why our communication failure was the other fellow's fault. The choice is unimportant because none of them does anything to help correct the misunderstanding. We may feel better after convincing ourselves that for one reason or another the other fellow let us down, but none of the problems that came as a result of the communication failure has been reduced. As a matter of fact while "A" has been busy examining "B's" intelligence, devotion to duty, character, and mental health, "B" has been making a similar analysis of "A" as he has constructed his explanation why the misunderstanding was "A's" fault. When those two people confront each other on the issue of blame, the potential for real fireworks exists. What began as a simple case of not understanding one another, may well become a shouting match very similar to the "You did it! I did not. Yes you did! You did it on purpose!" kind of quarrel engaged in by children, or it may become a silent feud. In either case the problem escalates, the magnitude of the misunderstanding multiplies, and a minor communication failure may become a crisis which disrupts the operaton of at least part of the organization.

And what lies at the root of the misunderstanding? The assumptions the communicators began with. They expected to be understood and when they weren't their assumptions about the simplicity of communication made them fix blame rather than seek solutions. Our expectations influence our behavior. Nowhere is this axiom more valid than for communication. Much misunderstanding results simply from our failure to expect it, from our notion that that which is common is necessarily simple, that there really is a white horse.

If we are to improve our communication, we must begin by accepting as a first principle the idea that communication is complex, the product of a number of forces, and that partial misunderstanding is the normal state of affairs between two human beings. When we accept this notion, we are then freed from the necessity of fixing blame, and can redirect our energies toward identifying the reasons for misunderstanding and toward reducing it.

Unfortunately, many of the books and training courses on communication for businessmen help perpetuate the assumption that communication is simple. They promise success to the individual who thinks positively, looks others straight in the eye, speaks in a strong voice, divides speeches into three parts, remembers names, has self-confidence, smiles, shakes hands firmly, or follows some set of steps designed to insure that he can get others to respond as he wants them to every time. Although some of this advice is generally good—it probably is better to smile than to frown for example—to the extent that it leads us to believe that there is a set of tricks or gimicks which constitute a sure fire formula for communication success it misleads us. No formula can solve for us the difficult interpersonal situations we encounter almost daily. The search for such a formula is based on the belief that if properly done communication can be simple and easy. Those who peddle such advice do a disservice because they help perpetuate the false assumptions mentioned earlier.

The quality of our interpersonal relationships can improve only if we attempt to examine our assumptions so that we can develop an understanding of the process of communication grounded in fact rather than hope. Without a sophisticated concept of human interaction, we cannot expect to behave effectively.

Businessmen concerned about their own communication effectiveness and the general communication practices of their organizations can take the first steps to improvement only when they stop searching for white horses and begin seriously trying to understand the complexities of the communication process. Trainers and consultants who offer business simplistic answers to the problem of human interaction should be rejected in favor of those who will substitute the goal of understanding for gimmicks and formulas. Taking the appropriate first step does not assure final success, but the destination can never be reached unless that step is made in the proper direction.

PROFILE OF DAVID H. SMITH

David H. Smith is Assistant Professor of Speech in the Department of Speech, Communication and Theatre Arts at the University of Minnesota. He received his B.S. summa cum laude from Ohio State, his M.A., from Northwestern University, and the Ph.D. from Ohio State University. Before joining the Faculty of the University of Minnesota, Dr. Smith spent six years as a high school teacher in Ohio and Hawaii, and three years on the faculty of the Ohio State University Department of Speech where he also served as Director of the Summer Center of Communicative Arts, a training center for talented high school students.

Dr. Smith is a specialist in human communication. His teaching and research emphasize communication theory, communication in groups and organizations, negotiation, and research methods. He is currently researching "Communication Behavior which Differentiates Successful from Unsuccessful Negotiators" with NDEA funds made available through the University of Minnesota Graduate School. In addition to his work in the Minnesota Department of Speech, Communication and Theatre Arts, Professor Smith has taught administrative communication in the School of Hospital Administration and the School of Public Administration. He has conducted management training courses for industry and government. He consults with industry on organizational communication and speaks to conventions and conferences. Among the organizations with which he has worked are the 3M Company, Green Giant, Inc., Medtronic Inc., The National Office Products Association, The National School Supply and Equipment Association, the U. S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Civil Service Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the American Rehabilitation Foundation.

He has been a guest lecturer at Northwestern University, the University of Kansas, and Grinnell College. He teaches short courses in management communication for the Banff Centre for Continuation Education of the University of Calgary, and the St. Thomas Management Center. During the summer of 1968 he was a visitor on the faculty of the University of Hawaii College of General Studies. He is vice-president for organizational communication of the National Society for the Study of Communication. Professional membership include the Speech Association of America, the Central States Speech Association, the Speech Association of Minnesota, and the American Association of University Professors.

Dr. Smith has published in various professional journals, and he is a contributor to the forthcoming book, *Studies in Two Person Negotiation*, edited by Harold B. Pepinsky. He is currently working on two books; a reader in interpersonal communication, and a training program in management communication.